1: Washington S-4 (no date) 1956 AF13 Northwest China AF13

RELIGION

I. Historical Background of the Religions of Inner Asia

791 795 Various religions have been strong in the Northwest, among them Shamanism, Buddhism, Nestorianism, Manichaeism, Confucianism, Taoism and Islam. The latter is the predominant religion among the Turks and the Dungans. Buddhism is the religion of the Mongols, Mongours, Shira Yögür and Tibetans. Nestorianism and Manichaeism have become extinct, but Confucianism and Taoism are still alive in Chinese communities (see China Handbook).

A. Shamanism

791 756 Shamanism is a pagan faith based upon concepts of demons and spirits, with whom the Shaman, or priest, attempts to maintain contact by either sending his soul to them or receiving them into his own soul. The Shaman usually functions in a self-induced trance, produced by taking alcoholic beverages, toadstool powder, et cetera. A high percentage of Shamans suffer from various neuroses, severe forms of hysteria, or epilepsy, and the selection of a new Shaman may be based upon such manifestations of a deviant personality. Sometimes, however, the position of Shaman is hereditary.

[787] [293] [296] [158] [428]

756 The Shaman is regarded as a mediator between man and the supernatural. He exercises his magic powers for such purposes as healing, rain-making, success in hunting, prevention of accidents, and divination. In central Asia, the common methods of divination are by the flight of birds and by scapulimancy, or interpretation of cracks on the shoulderblade of a sheep which has been treated over a fire. While functioning in his supernatural capacity, the Shaman wears a distinctive dress, usually a long robe decorated with metal discs, small bells and the claws of the totem birds.

[787] [292]

The training of a Shaman is long and involved, and he usually does not reach full professional status until the age of forty or fifty. Shamanists have no ecclesiastical organization, but rank Shamans on the basis of their success in dealing with the supernatural.

756 77 Besides the various ghosts, ancestral and animal spirits and other lesser supernatural beings, the Shamanists recognize a supreme being, the Tengri, who is the universe personified, God and heaven. He is the fountain of life, as he gives man his soul, and the fate of all peoples depends upon him. The Altaic people believe that the Tengri observes all and everything; no

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Kalmyk

the Piedmont gravel and the salt swamps north of this. 000

From the Dsun yurts where we first met people again, we took an 361
easterly course and after two more travel-days we came to Barun kurä. In the belt of meadowland which we followed there stood yurts in groups of three and four of first Dsun- and then Barun- Mongols. Like the old Jew who sold ribbons in the market of my home town, I extolled my wares in the tents. I exchanged butter, barley and sheep for my hardware and my silver. The people were always friendly to 609
us. We slept and ate in their dwellings. At first they seemed sullen, but they warmed up after closer contact and they laughed and sang with Han and Tsch'eng. Most of the men spoke Tibetan as well as [191]
Mongolian. I became acquainted with their happy-go-lucky way of living. Their liquor plays a great part in their lives, and they make 273
it from mare's milk. The men travel from one tent to another, drink and sing, while the women have the duty of taking care of the work and of the herd animals. But although the women are obliged to 562
shoulder the burden of the household, and increase the fortunes of the family, they are by no means the slaves of the men. One old man who wanted to sell me a few sheep on my visit from yurt to yurt was given such a severe lecture by his wife who did not agree to the sale, the lecture even being punctuated by a raised stick, that my companions were forever cured of their initial great enthusiasm for Mongol women. The Mongol woman, it is true, enjoys great freedom compared to the Chinese woman. The women of the Dam Mongols have an astonishing amount of authority for Asiatic women!

The Tsaidam Mongols (Chinese: Dam men gu) do not have high 428
moral standards. As in many other parts of Tibet, the son, when he has reached his majority, gets the family property even though the father is still living and the parents get a certain share set aside for them. This is a very old custom. It was said to have arisen during the times when people still set out on wars of conquest. The men capable of bearing arms, who set out to war and who were able actively to protect their families, were also /349/ the owners of the family property. Now, however, the young Dam Mongols try to shirk their 888
responsibilities as much as possible. Today they are little more than warriors and, besides, they give their old parents barely enough to live on. I often saw two old people behind a protective wall that was full of holes and squatting on a dung heap like beggars while their son lived beside them in a fine yurt.

Marriages of the Dam Mongols seem to be entered upon as casual- 586
ly as they are dissolved. After a couple has lived together for a while